

## Ambassador Cekuta's remarks at U.S.-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce annual conference

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Washington D.C.

Ambassador Suleymanov, Deputy Minister Mammadov, Mrs. Sadigova, PDAS Vineyard, dear friends and colleagues, it is a great pleasure to join you at the U.S.-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce annual conference and also to welcome you to Washington.

In this 25th anniversary of Azerbaijan's re-emergence as an independent state and 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between our two countries, it is important to look back at what has been accomplished in those 25 years, and also to look ahead at what Azerbaijanis and Americans can do working together.

The basis of our relationship remains engagement in the area of security, in the area of rule of law and democratic development, and the area of economics, including energy. Engagement in all three areas is essential to helping Azerbaijanis build the independent, stable, prosperous, democratic state they have long desired and which we see as important to a Europe whole, free, and at peace. Each of these three areas is -- as I and others have repeatedly stated -- equally important to realizing an independent, stable, prosperous, democratic Azerbaijan, and none of these three vectors can be usefully pursued in isolation from the others. Given that we are at an event focusing on commerce, let me underline how this reality is true in the realm of economics and business.

Azerbaijan has come a long way from the economic situation it was in at the time it regained its independence 25 years ago. Its development of major oil deposits gave Azerbaijanis a terrific economic boost and also made an important contribution to Europe's energy security, a contribution Azerbaijan is increasing with the development of the Southern Gas Corridor. But as many of us in this room recognize, Azerbaijan needs to diversify its economy, to see new industries and sources of growth, if it is going to realize fully the growth and prosperity its people want.

There has been important progress in this regard. Many of us remember President Aliyev's meeting last April, following his visit to Washington, with the leadership of the American Chamber of Commerce in Azerbaijan. That meeting was followed by further discussions with other government and political figures, the publication of the Chamber's White Paper, and the release of the government's economic reform roadmap.

There were changes on the ground, for example the further development of modern air and surface transportation systems that make Azerbaijan an ever more important node in the New Silk Road connecting China and East Asia along with India and South Asia with Western and Central Europe. There were significant improvements in Azerbaijan's customs procedures and the shift of more government services to the ASAN platform.

But we also know further progress is necessary and possible. Many in Azerbaijan's government and private sector have talked about the need for tax reforms, and look forward to this being the year it happens. Stronger rule of law -- both in principle and in practice -- remains important for encouraging entrepreneurs and attracting -- and keeping -- investment, whether from domestic or foreign sources. So too are continued efforts to fight corruption, to boost transparency, and to strengthen the education system. So too is the need to engage the public

-- consumers, business people, farmers, entrepreneurs, journalists -- on the reforms, their goals, and the plans for their realization. Experience around the world shows that the public's understanding and buy-in is essential to an economic program's success.

I am not forgetting that third sector: security. We recognize the difficulties that result from Azerbaijan's geographic location, including the reality of the protracted conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which saw a renewed instance of fighting this past weekend. Finding a peaceful settlement can only help boost the prosperity and well-being as well as the stability of Azerbaijan.

In closing, please let me reiterate that the United States values its relationship with Azerbaijan and has long invested in its success. We also recognize what Azerbaijan has done to support the United States as well, whether in sending troops to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo, whether through the Northern Distribution Network supporting U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and what Azerbaijan has done to support the wider international community through Azerbaijan's relations with Israel, or through its efforts to fight terrorism and provide an example to others in the region as a majority Shi'a state with a history of religious tolerance.

We have had a strong partnership and, as we will see with today's conference, we will continue to build that partnership in the years to come. I look forward to today's discussion and the next steps that result.

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